



How To Make Your Cat a Lifetime Family Member

Adding a cat to your life is more like adopting a child than acquiring a possession. A cat is sentient; he's aware of himself and of you. He has fears and desires – not always the same ones as you, although he'll do a masterful job of getting you to eventually see things his way! A cat is a delightful enigma: a lone hunter who's also unabashedly affectionate. Give him a good home and a long life. Be charmed by his feline grace and by all means join in when he decides it's time for irrational exuberance!

Make the Commitment

Before adopting your cat, resolve to make him a member of the family for his whole life. His health and well-being are in your hands. Take care of him as he goes through his ups and downs. He will return the favor.

Basics

Good food and water. It actually doesn't cost more to feed your cat premium cat food. There's less filler and your cat will be healthier. You and your cat will come up with a good rotation. It's vitally important to provide your cat with fresh, preferably filtered, water at all times.

Veterinary care. You need to be comfortable with your vet. Be an extension of your vet's eyes and ears by getting to know your cat's normal behavior and giving him regular mini health inspections. But don't play doctor – call your vet if you're at all suspicious or you notice a marked or acute change in your cat's routine.

Litter box. Squeaky clean. No strong-smelling cleaners. Pleasant, quiet location. Approved by Mr. Cat.

Cost. You need to make a financial commitment, too. Plan on about 500 dollars a year per cat. Food, veterinary care, a litter box and litter, scratching posts, a cat carrier, and feeding bowls all cost money; don't skimp on these basic necessities. Be prepared for increased medical bills when kitty is older. Pet insurance may be a viable cost-saving option. You also want to buy nice things like cat furniture, toys, and treats to enrich his daily life.

Form a More Perfect Union

Know your cat. Spend time with your cat. Learn the meaning of his different meows. Observe his many non-verbal signals; that's primarily how your cat communicates. He uses his tail, ears, and eyes, and other body language to express himself. Watch for the sheet on "How to Talk 'Cat'."

Play with Your Cat. Perhaps no other activity has such a profound effect on the nature of a cat-human relationship. Play brings the hunt inside. You get to learn your cat's hunting behaviors, read and anticipate his intentions, and script scenarios for him in real time. By making the toy act like prey and responding to your cat's moves and signals, the two of you are practically hunting together. You're an honorary cat!

Accommodate his natural behaviors. Make your house cat-friendly. Cats need to scratch; one tall sturdy scratching post is the bare minimum – more is better. Delight your cat by buying or making a cat tree; he'll love having a cats-only place where he can climb, jump, scratch, play, sleep, and birdwatch.

Help him when he has a problem. If your cat stops using his litter box, it's due to a medical condition, something he dislikes about the litter box, or stress. Investigate all three possible causes in approximately that order. He wants things to get back to normal just like you do. If your cat scratches you, it could be misplaced aggression or lack of knowing that your hand is not a toy. Treat each problem with empathy.

Praise your cat. Your cat likes the sound of your voice; it's soothing. Each day tell him he's a great kitty.

Twenty Years from Now...

With good care and a little luck, your cat can live twenty years. If you're in your thirties when you adopt your cat, he'll be living with you when the kids have all graduated from college. If you're in your fifties now, your cat, the one with much boundless energy now, will still be there when you're in your seventies, retired. He'll be an old cat by then, probably no longer able to jump to his favorite places. Sometimes he might not make it to his litter box. The two of you will accept each other's occasional mishaps. You'll help him up to your lap, and he'll purr just as loudly and happily for you as always. An old friend. A member of the family.

To view more Shelter Sheets online, go to: <http://cats.about.com/library/nosearch/blss.htm>